Persia Takes the Up Grade

By J. K. MUMFORD.

He shook the green flag of holy war when the whole army wouldn't have been able to stand off the New York police force in a catch as catch can.

EARLY in the morning the tough little gray donkeys that carry more than half the business of the East began to come in at the big gateways in the mud wall, loaded high to port and to starboard with brushwood—just little, no account brush such as any good American fruit grower snips from his apple trees in the spring and burns in a prodigious heap down in the back meadow.

All through the night—all the way from the towering slopes of the Sahend—they had plodded along, their drivers toiling on foot down the long, rock ribbed trail, twenty, thirty miles. In Persia this brush, none of it more than the thickness of your finger, is the fuel of the rich. And it gets further and further away as the years of consumption go on, and costs like smoke.

While in our beloved country of haste and waste capacious wagons of anthracite are being dumped at everybody's door, the Persian of consequence is laying in a liberal and expensive store of this absurd pea brush. In the fall months, likewise, the Persian poor prepare their fuel, which to me is the most pathetic index—or was at that time—of the poverty and hopelessness of the country's condition. With buckets of water and heavy, wide bladed hoes they work up the manure which all summer long they have gathered after the passing caravans of donkeys and camels, and shape it into bricks about a foot in length, setting them up in the ancient fashion of card houses, to dry out against the cold days that are ahead.

And they are cold. Down in the south, where the "Injun ocean laughs and smiles," there are poppies and palm trees, but when winter comes to the Persian uplands, which are seven thousand feet above sea level, it comes as the conquering Mongol came centuries ago, with a whoop and a bellow, and for months the whole central plateau lies buried under from five to a dozen feet of snow.

I commiserated the banker, who sat beside me on the garden bench and watched the brush unloaded into his outhouses, on the dearth of fuel, for brush is no substitute for coal, and burning up year after year the manure which ought to be going back on the land spells agricultural ruin and widespread hunger about as clearly as anything can.

"Yes," he answered, "and the worst part of it is that less than a hundred miles from here the Kurdish mountains are full of as good anthracite as anybody need wish to see."

It was the first time I had ever heard that there were coal deposits in Persia, though I knew well enough about the rich mines of amethyst and turquoise and other mineral treasures which in olden times were so highly productive but now have succumbed to the general slump. But nobody knows yet just what is or isn't in Persia. Unnumbered centuries of intense living, of wars and luxury, of toiling and eating, and certain later centuries of decadence and growing poverty, have not yet exhausted, and, in fact, have not even revealed, the magnitude of its riches. The discovery of Persian petroleum injected a new element into the Asiatic complex. What yet remains—unsuspected—underneath that sad and wornout land may easily enough bring wars and more wars.

"But," I asked the banker, "if there is coal here, why in the world don't you organize a company and mine it? Until the railroad comes coal can just as well be camelbacked from Kurdistan as this wretched brush can be jackassed down from the Sahend."

He smiled the tolerant smile of experience. "The difficulty about organizing corporations in Persia, my dear sir, is that no Persian will trust any other Persian, as a director, to hold a dollar over night. Doing business in Iran costs something more than eternal vigilance. It also demands your eyeteeth. The legal rate of interest here, for example, is 12 per cent. There would be no difficulty in getting 25, with a perfectly satisfactory bonus, but the man who lends must be like Napoleon—able to go without sleep. He needs to be wide awake twenty-four hours of the day, sitting on the security."

There was a world of history condensed into that observation, and I recalled a formula given me by a smiling merchant in Stamboul: "It takes six Christians to beat a Jew, six Jews to beat a Greek, six Greeks to beat an Armenian and six Armenians to beat a Persian." The testimony, which seemed to be piling up, shed a great deal of light on the commercial and political decline of Persia, a decline that has made a bankrupt of what was once the proudest and most opulent and most powerful of the nations of the East—or for that matter of the world; a nation superlatively rich in gold and gems and art and literature and lordly architecture, when the now "civilized" races of Europe were wearing the skins of beasts and painting their own epidermises with dyestuffs after the manner of the Apache of three-quarters of a century ago.

The pendulum has a strange way of swinging. For two hundred years Persia has been drifting farther and farther into the backwater, and Europe, with eager and rather ruthless hands, has gathered what was left of her ancient splendor—in painting and tile, in textile and in wonderful potteries, in cunning metal work and quaint, half barbaric jewels, until now all that is above ground is gone. To be sure, you have only to scratch a yard underneath the surface to unearth the survivals of ancient handiwork that put the modern artist and artisan to shame. There are splendid cities buried forty feet under ground, cities that the sands swallowed up centuries ago, but the Persia that the sun shines on has been for long decades a melancholy thing. It has reminded me of "old families" in America—and they're not so different the world over. It has stayed right at home, too poor to travel and too proud to move, looking down with brave though ludicrous contempt on the new neighbors, making over its old clothes and ever growing pathetically thinner on the consciousness of its past pomp and its "old mahogany." And little by little that has gone.

Persia's timber has vanished, and with it the water courses; with them most of the agriculture. What remains is carried on in the self-same fashion that it was ten thousand years ago. The industry—in the main—has been a weaving of rugs, and some shipment of dried fruit and licorice and tobacco not at all sufficient to pay the cost of maintaining a shoddy and vainglorious court and its swarm of political parasites and the shell of a shabby army that was seldom if ever paid. And yet Persia has lived, and despite loss of large territories has held itself together. It has lived on memories and clothed itself in pride, and staved off through years of penury the neighbors great and small who strove by force and by guile to take away its yellow jacket.

Persia's great asset has been geographical position, and its statesmen have traded with this in a manner which bespeaks commercial genius. It is a buffer which England has long striven to control because it buttressed India against the onward march of the Russian, but which by an indefatigable process of penetration Russia—down to the time of the world war—was slowly absorbing into herself. The war did many things besides making "cost-plus" millionaires and teaching women to drive trucks. It seems among its more important results to have switched the center of tension into the East, and played the overture to the great drama of the next century, which is to be the recrudescence of Asia. And it has started Persia on the way to a colossal change—though just what the change will be no man knows. All that has kept her from vanishing utterly as a nation any time the last half century or more was that neither England nor Russia ever dared break the eggs that were necessary for the making of the omelette they both hungered for, though both were bound the eggs should never hatch a national independence for Persia.

Mr. Morgan Shuster, who years ago went out to Persia to see if he could make the books balance, found within a very short time that Persia had within herself the possibility of perfect solvency, but his ministrations were not approved by either of the rivals for Persian control, and he came away, while the great game of attrition went on.

Persia was pathetic. In the cities there was starvation. It was so commonplace that nobody paid any heed to it. Night after night one could hear the bugles playing gayly in the garrisons and the dogs snarling and howling until dawn in the graveyards on the hill—at a work which it was well the darkness hid.

Wages were merely a figure of speech. The gorgeous rugs of Kerman and Meshed and Tabriz were woven by nimble fingered little boys, many of them not more than six or seven years old, and for the making of these rich creations they were paid the munificent sum of 10 cents a day. And it was a funny looking 10 cents, made, up almost to 1900, in a fashion that antedated the Pharaohs. Huge bullets of silver were struck by hand with a die, which bore the monogram of the Shah, and flattened to a thickness of perhaps an eighth of an inch. This lump they called a *kran*. As money it was just two jumps ahead of the wampum of the early American Indian; but one of these bullets, mind you, paid for twelve hours' human labor—and skilled labor at that. Out of this generous recompense they were expected to "find themselves," and they did. They found themselves bread, and washed it down with water, which was a calamity in itself and the advance agent of pestilence.

The word "bread" doesn't mean—in Persia—a fat brown loaf like mother used to make, with the butter inviting crust running over the edge of the tin for sheer joy. Persian bread is simply a thin, unleavened batter of barley, poured over a stone set slantwise and with a fire underneath. When it comes off it is merely a thin sheet, about the thickness and consistency, as some one once said, of a cobbler's apron. When it's fresh you can fold it, and the little Persian weaver boys, on their way to the caravanserais where the great looms were, stopped in the gray of the dawn and bought these sheets.

The lads folded the bread into small compass and tucked it into the skirt pockets of their long, black ministerial coats, which are the national costume established by the Kadjar dynasty, and which took the last touch of grace or beauty out of Persian life. When noontime came there was half an hour to eat this repast and drink the water that went with it. And here's about the water:

All through Persia there's an underground system, built in the days of Persia's glory; nobody knows just when, for the Persian race has forgotten nearly all the details of its history, living only in the large outline. These tunnels take up all the water that comes down from the hills and carries it over—or, better, under—endless miles of country. The farmer gets a little, if he's lucky, to wet down his grain or tobacco field. In the cities it runs in open ditches through streets that have no pavements and no suspicion of drainage and that have lain accumulating filth for thousands of years. People go and wash everything in it—clothes, dishes, children, goats and whatever other live stock they may possess—then the "water boss" pulls a plug in the mud wall and lets the tide down into your garden, if you have one. It irrigates your flower beds and your salad patch and then runs into your cellar. If you're a Persian you drink it and live. If you're a European you distil it and then mix it with Jamaica rum, which, despite the inhibitions of the Koran, can be had at the corner in the bazaars for somewhat less than it used to cost in Brooklyn even in the most lenient and idyllic of days. Now and again, to be sure, the plague comes along—or some dire form of dysentery or typhoid—and eliminates some thousands of people, who, being good Mohammedans, don't mind dying, to vary the gray monotony of Persian existence.

That is Persia in the mass—a people with minds as keen as razors, who look on life as a melancholy kind of joke perpetrated on them by Allah and his vicar, Mahomet, for the good of their souls, and who, drawing in fatalism with the maternal milk, have never learned to think of themselves as martyrs.

You may know the Persians and not like them, but if you have in you the leaven of love for superb tradition—in art, in letters, in military grandeur, in almost any line of human accomplishment—you're bound to take off your hat to what they have been, and if there's any virtue in being a good loser, the Persian through the last century or two has been entitled to a large measure of respect. He went right on living on the nothing that was left him, looking pleasant and blithely refusing to be swallowed up, even by the two biggest and land hungriest nations on earth. He made the air purple with bombast when it was needed, he shook the green flag of holy war when the whole army wouldn't have been able to stand off the New York police force in a catch as catch can; he used his subtle wits to play England off against Russia and Russia against England decade after decade, getting money enough from each or both to meet the payroll of the hungry dependents, and while he looked serious laughed inside at the situation. It was the greatest cross ruff in international history.

And it begins to look as if he was going to win through. There was stiff fighting in Persia through the war, and England, sensing golden opportunity in Persia, after the Russian collapse, saw large future need for highways and other conveniences if the oil fields were to be safeguarded by arms, as oil fields from now on may have to be. Therefore England was paying in Persia through the later years of the war five dollars a day for men to work on the

Continued on Page Ten.